**The Sins of the Marcosians**

In the 13th Chapter of the First Book of Against Heresies, Irenaeus of Lugdunum turns his attention to the followers of Marcus, otherwise known as the Marcosians. But rather than immediately explaining in detail the cosmological and cosmogonical system of the Marcosians, as is his preferred method of refutation, he begins instead with *ad hominem,* exposing the ritual, illusory magic of Marcus. Later, in Chapters 14-20, he will describe their explanation of the cosmos and their theology. In this initial chapter, however, he begins in an altogether different manner and will conclude this chapter by asserting that the Marcosians are motivated ultimately by the desire for sexual exploitation, which has had disastrous effects on the people and communities affected.

I have begun by summarizing the flow of this section, drawing out points of interest to understand the shape of his argument. I continue by discussing one key theological point: *commanding prophecy*. I have concluded by considering Irenaeus’s ethical claims and what this approach implies, relying on Dominic J. Unger’s footnote about Irenaeus’ use of the phrase “*the life of God*.”

In general, this section’s argumentation follows a centrifugal pattern, moving from the personal faults of Marcus being impressed upon the people by illusory tricks to inducing the people to perform modest participation in his eucharist. Participation is suddenly amplified by applying social and psychological pressure and compelling a participant to prophesy. Lastly, the participants are encouraged to give money and engage in sexual acts with Marcus, which Irenaeus sees as Marcus’s underlying objective. Thus, Irenaeus argues that Marcus pressures these participants, who are primarily women, by a series of ‘miraculous signs’ and increasing stressors to become his disciples, which ends in financial and sexual exploitation; each of the ritual acts of the Marcosians is thereby interpreted as placing a prospective disciple in an inauthentic heightened state as means to accomplish his ends.

This chapter comes after the lengthy refutation of the Valentinians. He then quickly deals with some smaller groups and turns in Chapter 13 his attention to the Marcosians, whom he will deal with at length. Irenaeus begins, “A certain member of their company, Marcus by name, who boasts of correcting his teacher, is also very skilled in magical imposture.” (AH 1.13.1)[[1]](#footnote-1) Here, skipping over the first critique leveled at Marcus to the second would be tempting. Nevertheless, the first critique is essential for comprehending Irenaeus’s concept of his apostolic authority and how he envisions the preaching of the Apostles functioning in the church. For Irenaeus, to correct one’s teacher is a significant accusation. Irenaeus asserts his authority comes from his preaching the message of the Apostles, which he has through Polycarp of Smyrna. He spends the entire book of *The Demonstration,* giving us his summary of the apostolic preaching. Later, in Against Heresies, he traces not only the literal succession of bishops (AH 3.3.1) but also sees his message as authenticated by its uniformity with apostolic teaching and the “rule of faith” (AH 1.21.1). This is not to say he could not expand or clarify this message but to *correct* it would be to upend how the church derives its authoritative message. So, instead of receiving a message, Marcus goes beyond a message that the Valentinians have already corrupted.

The additional criticism of “magical imposture” should also be noted. However, Irenaeus marks them as mere tricks or illusions, which is surprising. Later, he has no issue suggesting that Marcus, in all likelihood, “possesses even some demon as a familiar.” It might only strengthen his argument against him to say that his ritual acts were also done by demonic power. Still, Irenaeus describes Marcus as performing tricks that have a natural explanation. This is likely what he means when he describes Marcus as similar to Anaxilaus, who is considered to have “combined accepted medical herb-lore with the marvelous.”[[2]](#footnote-2) That said, the purposeful knowledge of the natural world to mimic a supernatural event helps support Irenaeus’ central claim that Marcus is a deceiver.

Interestingly, Irenaeus frames his opening argument against Marcus and the Marcosians by stating that they are liars, a departure from his usual tactic of intricately laying out a group’s theological claims and beliefs. Usually, he employs a method of *reductio ad absurdum* and casts heretical beliefs as inherently self-defeating. (*AH 1.Preface*), However, here, he begins by showing that Marcus is a fraud and that his claims of being possessed by a “great power” are utterly baseless and predicated on what can be proven to be mere tricks. It’s unclear whether this is because he believes this to be a better rhetorical strategy or that he understands the mechanism behind the tricks and simply knows how they are done. In any case, Irenaeus wants to clearly communicate that the Marcosians are liars.

Of course, his magic tricks have an added insidious aspect because they seek to imitate the eucharistic meal. Here, we find a eucharist similar to those early liturgies in the Apostolic Tradition attributed to Hippolytus or the Didache. However, Irenaeus wants to highlight several aspects that he sees as perversions. In particular, he focuses on the drawn-out epiclesis, the turning of the cup red/purple, the thanksgiving over many cups given to the women, and the pouring into the running-over cup. These can be taken as two groups of two actions, each with a ritual action and then a miraculous response. They also operate reflectively and comment on one another, The first completed by Marcus alone and the next an action completed by the gathered community. There is also the symbolic nature of each of the ritual actions. The first receives a special blessing for divine Grace; the second is a miracle of multiplication, which is done by the combined effort of the gathered community. In the end, this practice makes the gathered community complicit in the ritual action of the event. You are no longer an observer, passive participant, or simple recipient, but you have become an active participant in the ritual action–a priest in the church of Marcus.

The inclusion into the ritual action of the ‘Eucharist of Grace’ by Marcus is a small thing. However, Irenaeus turns to how Marcus’s strategy grows suddenly into a practice of compelling prophetic speech, which is cast as manipulative and sexualized. Irenaeus holds that Marcus seeks out rich women and attempts to seduce them, forcing them to prophesy. The text given by Irenaeus that Marcus is said to use is disturbingly amusing in its own right and has a unique and strange sort of logic to it, but for this treatment, it suffices to say that Irenaeus wants us to understand that there are sexual undertones lurking under each word and that there is a strategy of intense social and psychological pressure being employed upon “whatever women he considers worthy to partake of his Grace” and that the effect of Marcus’s manipulation is to make a woman “puffed up,” “aroused” in the soul, and to ensure “her heart beats faster than usual.” (AH 1.13.3) He wants to work a victim into a heightened psychological and emotive state. The result is that “nonsensical things and whatever happens to come to mind” are spoken and that she “considers herself a prophetess” and feels compelled to reward him “not only with the gift of her possessions,” […] but by sharing her body.”

For Irenaeus, two issues arise in this act of compelling prophecy. One is theological, and the other reaches the core of Marcus’ true motivation for all his deceptive tactics and tricks, namely disordered sexual desire and domination. The theological claim Irenaeus deals with systematically. Commanding prophecy is seen as wrong because one can only command a being lower than oneself. So, if a person commands prophetic speech, it cannot be from God since God is above both the one commanding and the one commanded. Irenaeus writes, “whomever God sends his grace from above, they are the ones who possess the God-given prophetic power and then speak where and when God wills, but not when Marcus commands.” and here concludes that “such spirits that are commanded by these men” are “sent by Satan to deceive and destroy those who have not kept that vigorous faith, which they had received through the Church in the beginning.” (AH 1.13.4) Based upon authority and the manner of prompting prophetic speech, I find it very clever to conclude that the prophecy is not genuine. He eliminates the need to deal with the prophesies themselves; for Irenaeus, it is enough to say that God speaks unprompted.

The claims of sexual manipulation and abuse, on the other hand, he treats differently. He recounts stories of people he knows or used to know in Asia Minor. (AH 1.13.5) He describes the harm caused and the emotional pain caused by repentance. He is also indignant toward the Marcosians, showing how bold and impervious to correction they are, seeing themselves as above judgment, incapable of being held accountable for their actions, and even using imprecatory statements to escape. (AH 1.13.6) I think from all this, it’s clear that for Irenaeus, it has become personal. I believe this is a likely cause of his departure from his usual mode of argumentation. He personally knows those who have been victimized. The Marcosians’ actions continue to have lasting effects on Irenaeus’ flock. His community is still dealing with the fallout. Some have repented, others are too ashamed to do so but have returned to the community of the faithful, others have abandoned the faith entirely, and some even live a double life, staying connected to both communities. (AH 1.13.7) Here, Irenaeus uses a provoking phrase to describe the outcomes of the Marcosians’ faith, which makes one despair of “*the life of God*.” Fr. Unger notes that this is reminiscent of Ephesians 4:17-20, which says,

Now this I affirm and insist on in the Lord: you must no longer walk as the gentiles walk, in the futility of their minds; they are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart. They have lost all sensitivity and have abandoned themselves to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.That is not the way you learned Christ![[3]](#footnote-3)

 I think Fr. Unger is correct. Likely, Irenaeus has this verse in mind as he writes this chapter and refutes the Marcosians. However, I am left wondering in what ways this is a theological claim. To what extent is a group to be considered heretical because there is sexual abuse and manipulation? It is evident that not only do new, minority religions that Irenaeus might describe as heretical sects have instances of sexual abuse, but so do long-established traditional religions. I do not mean here to rehearse the church sexual abuse scandals of the last century, but it’s clear that groups that would want to closely align themselves with the “rule of faith” presented by Irenaeus also have problems in this regard. To suggest they do not, as a measure of orthodoxy, is potentially dangerous and a recipe for willful denial and harmful cover-up.

Irenaeus’ desire to present the harm caused to actual people, I believe, is an unquestionable good. Religion used to manipulate people sexually is deplorable and sends harmful waves through communities that often span generations and can ruin people’s lives. It even has the potential to disconnect them from *the life of God*. I hope this never happens in any faith community, including my own. Nevertheless, I know that, sadly, it does continue to happen. Perhaps by portraying sexual abuse as an essential characteristic of heretical sects, we only add to the pressure to conceal occurrences. If, to claim legitimacy, religious communities are tempted to hide such cases, then I’m not sure if defining heretical sects or cults essentially by their use of sexual exploitation helps to prevent sexual violence.

1. Note: This paper was written with spelling and grammar suggestions provided by Grammarly.com.

   All quotes and citations of Against Heresies are from Irenaeus, Dominic J. Unger, and John J. Dillon. *Against the heresies. book 1*. New York, N.Y: Paulist Press, 1992. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Gordon, Richard. “magic, Roman.” *Oxford Classical Dictionary.* 27 Aug. 2020; Accessed 14 Oct. 2024. https://oxfordre.com/classics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.001.0001/acrefore-9780199381135-e-8279. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)